

Libya

Country in east-central North Africa. From 1911 to 1943 Libya was under Italian control; in 1951 it became an independent kingdom. In 1969 the Libyan monarchy was overthrown by a group of army officers, who then instituted a new regime.

In September 1938 the Italian government committed itself to its alliance with Germany by issuing racial anti-jewish legislation, similar to Germany's Nuremberg Laws. The Jews in Italian-controlled Libya, however, were not as badly affected by these laws as the Jews of Italy, because the governor of Libya, Marshal Italo Balbo, succeeded in lessening their impact. He also took the wind out of the local Fascists, who wanted to enforce harsher anti-Jewish measures. In fact, the Jews in Libya had more to fear from their Muslim neighbors than the Fascists; the Muslims were quite hostile and tormented the Jews.

The Jews' situation deteriorated after Marshal Balbo died in an airplane crash in June 1940. British, Italian, and German troops vied for dominance in the region, and their seesaw battles for Libya affected the Jews. In early 1941 the Italians regained control over Libya; they quickly accused the Jews there of having collaborated with the British. The Jews who held French citizenship were transferred to Tunisia, while the Jews with British citizenship---some 300--were moved to Italy, where they were detained in concentration camps. In 1944, after the Germans took control of northern Italy, they sent those British Jews to Bergen-Belsen.

In December 1941 and January 1942 the British retook the Cyrenaica region of Libya; the Italians succeeded in driving them away again during May and June 1942. At that point the Italian authorities carried out many new harsh anti-Jewish measures. They instituted several forced labor camps for Jews, including Giado, Gharyan, Jeren, and Tigrinna, all of which were located about 45 miles south of Tripoli. Some 3,000 Jews were imprisoned in Giado on the orders of Mussolini himself, while many other Jews were sent to the villages outside Giado, and interned in Gharyan, Jeren, and Tigrinna. Giado

was the worst camp in Libya: some 500 Jews died there of weakness, hunger, and disease, especially typhus and typhoid fever.

From June to December 1942 the authorities instituted even more anti-Jewish decrees. Jews were not allowed to make real-estate deals with "Aryan" Italians or with Muslims; they were forbidden to do import, export, or retail trade with Italy; or engage in any activity that could affect the defense of Libya. Next, all Jewish males between the ages of 18 and 45 were drafted for forced labor. In August a camp was established at Sidi Azaz (located some 62 miles east of Tripoli) for the Jews of the Tripolitania region. On October 9, 1942 a decree was issued whereby the racial laws of Italy were to be enforced in Libya, and on October 23 some 350 Jews were deported to the Tobruk area.

By December the battle over Libya was nearly over: all of Cyrenaica had been liberated and the British were nearing Tripolitania (Tripoli was liberated on January 23, 1943). After its liberation the Italians no longer ruled Libya, and all of their racial laws were repealed. However, the Jews of Libya were not left in peace: in November 1945, the Muslim population carried out a three day pogrom against the Jews, one of the most vicious pogroms in the country's history. One hundred and twenty-one Jews were murdered, hundreds more were wounded, synagogues were completely ruined, and hundreds of Jewish homes and places of business were ransacked and destroyed. This pogrom came as a great shock to the Jews, and as a result, many revitalized their sense of Jewish identity, as well as their wish to settle in Palestine. After the establishment of the State of Israel, more than 30,000 Jews left Libya for the new Jewish homeland.